

# DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Records custodians may think of disasters as large, catastrophic events such as tornadoes or floods — dramatic natural events over which there is little, if any, control. Yet many disasters are events that only affect records within a single repository. But whether large or small, disasters can threaten the security of records. A single fire or flood can erase substantial portions of a community's unique recorded history.

Caretakers of official records are responsible for safeguarding holdings from all varieties of threats. Preparing for disasters requires an ongoing commitment to:

- reduce potential risks
- develop a plan of action for response to disasters.

To prepare for a disaster, we must first become aware of the potential dangers records face.

## FIRE



Fire is a serious threat to records. Even if records do not burn completely, heat from the fire can char paper and melt plastic, rendering paper documents, photographic film, and audio, video, and computer tapes

unintelligible. Smoke and soot leave behind odors and stains. Moreover, firefighting efforts may do considerable damage to records, from both the pressure and quantity of water used to extinguish a blaze.

## Arson



Arson is the single greatest cause of fires in records repositories throughout the United States. Because records centers represent government, they may be targets of deliberate or random violence. In some cases, the arsonist is someone known to staff. Arsonists may use whatever combustible material is to hand or they may collect combustible material and bring it to their chosen site.

Take all threats of arson seriously and immediately report them to the police. If the threat is made by telephone, carefully record details of the call. Monitor any areas in your building where individuals can linger without the supervision of staff. Install intruder alarms and make sure that they work. Test all alarm systems frequently. Sometimes incendiary devices are thrown through windows; an intruder alarm may be the first defense against fire.

[continued]

Produced by the Georgia  
Department of Archives and History,  
a Division of the  
Office of Secretary of State

Lewis A. Massey, Secretary of State



Funded in part by  
the National Center for Preservation  
Technology and Training,  
National Park Service,  
United States  
Department of the Interior

## Fires from Small Appliances

Portable electric heaters and coffeemakers are common sources of fires. Their high electrical demand frequently overloads older wiring, and they are often accidentally left on after staff have gone home for the day. Restrict coffeemakers to break rooms or other areas away from records. Check appliances frequently and verify that they are unplugged at the end of the day.

## Smoking and Fire Risk

Smoking within a records facility is unrelated to any function or operation, and literally brings fire into the building. Prohibit smoking within all record centers and courthouses for the protection of records and for the health and safety of individuals.

## WATER DAMAGE



Water distorts paper and causes ink and other media to run or even disappear. Wet records can grow mold within 48 hours, so even a small water disaster requires a prompt response.

## Pipes

Water pipes typically run throughout a building and may well be located directly over areas where records are stored. Any water from a leaking pipe will run to the lowest level in the building, making all areas beneath a leak susceptible to damage. Know where pipes run directly over stack areas.

Do not store records in boxes directly on the floor. Set boxes on pallets (plastic, if possible) that are 5" higher than floor level. Install water alarms in basements or other low-level areas to warn of rising water during times when the building is closed. Link all alarm systems to a security office or other location that is staffed 24 hours a day.

Alert all staff to the location of water cutoff valves within the building. Ensure access to these valves at all times. If it takes an hour to find a per-

son who knows how to turn off the water, then what started out as a simple job for a mop and bucket can develop into a major flood.

Keep rolls of plastic sheeting handy to cover shelving and cabinets in the event of a leak. Do not, however, use plastic sheeting as a permanent covering for records: it will prevent good air circulation and create a potential climate for mold.

Immediately air dry or freeze wet records to prevent further damage and mold growth. Being prepared for disasters means developing contacts with the appropriate consultants and vendors beforehand, not after the fact.

## The Roof



Know the age and current condition of your roof. Roof weaknesses are usually discovered in the middle of a rainy season, just when protection is needed most. Regularly inspect roofs and roof drains to ensure that they are not clogged. Note that flat roofs tend to collect debris which may clog the drains.

Roofs have limited life spans. If your roof was guaranteed to last 15 years and has passed its tenth year, begin making plans to replace it.

## RENOVATION



Statistics indicate that disasters are more likely to occur when a building's mechanical or structural systems are being renovated. Construction projects also provide workers access to stack and storage areas of the building, reducing records security. Do not permit workers to wander freely about the building. Ensure that fire detection and security systems remain active at all times during any renovation project. Be involved in your renovation project.

Coordinate your institution's day-to-day work with the work of the renovation. Allow staff to share their concerns about the project. Transfer records to a safe location before work begins.

## SECURITY

Unfortunately, theft is a common threat to records. To prevent thefts:

- Establish written policies that stipulate exactly how a user may interact with records.
- Never permit users to browse stack areas and retrieve records for themselves.
- Do not label a record box with a list of contents; a user who gains unauthorized access will readily find whatever item is sought. Label record boxes with location numbers known only to staff. Exclude location information from user finding aids.
- Limit the number of records that a user can view at one time.
- Photocopy or microfilm popular historic records and limit access to the originals.

By providing controlled access for current users, you help to ensure availability of records for future generations.

## YOUR DISASTER PLAN

After potential risks have been assessed, the next step in preparing for disasters is to develop an organized plan for responding when a disaster actually occurs.

This plan will include:

- Locator maps for firefighters that show the location of vital records within the building.
- A telephone tree of staff and volunteers from your community who can be counted on to provide help in the event of a disaster. Include contacts within the Georgia Department of Archives and History.
- An inventory list of emergency supplies and their location.
- An established chain of command for coordinating the recovery effort, based upon *tasks* to be performed.
- The names and telephone numbers of your pre-established contacts at freezer storage and disaster recovery services.

Update your plan annually, and distribute copies of the disaster plan to all staff. Remember to keep a duplicate copy of the plan at home. Your recovery plan will be of no use if it burns up inside your desk at work. Practice and reevaluate your plan regularly.

## MICROFILMING VITAL RECORDS



Even the best-laid plans cannot prevent every possible disaster from happening. Accordingly, the safest way to secure the information in records is to create another copy to store off-site. Microfilm all vital records. Be sure to include inventories and finding aids which are a part of your vital records.

## BACKING UP COMPUTER RECORDS

Create backup copies of all computer records. Store the backup copy off-site in a secure location.

## RESOURCES AND PUBLICATIONS

Preparing for disasters requires an ongoing commitment to ensure that potential risks are minimized and that a workable plan exists for active response. Even a small disaster can deprive today's Georgians and future Georgians of a significant portion of their history.

For more information, please call 404-656-3554 to contact the Conservator at the Georgia Department of Archives and History, a division of the Office of Secretary of State.

[continued]

## RESOURCES AND PUBLICATIONS

[continued]

### OTHER RESOURCES

Federal Emergency Management Agency.  
*Emergency Management Guide for Business  
and Industry: A Step-By-Step Approach  
to Emergency Planning, Response and  
Recovery for Companies of All Sizes.*

Washington, DC: FEMA, 1993.

Order from:

Publications Distribution Center

P.O. Box 2012

Jessup, MD 20794.

Telephone: 1-800-480-2520.

Fortson, Judith.

*Disaster Planning and Recovery.*

New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 1992.

Available from:

The Society of American Archivists

600 S. Federal Street, Suite 504

Chicago, Illinois 60605.

Telephone 312-922-0140.

National Archives and Records Administration,  
Office of Records Administration.

*Vital Records and Records Disaster Mitigation  
and Recovery.*

College Park, MD: NARA, 1996.

Available from:

Publications and Distribution Staff

(NECD) RM. G-9

National Archives

Washington, DC 20408. ■

This paper meets the ANSI Z39.48-1992 standard for permanent paper. ∞

Georgia Department of Archives and History  
Secretary of State  
330 Capitol Avenue, S.E.  
Atlanta, GA 30334